it hands Toots a punch it will hit something soft and easy and unnatural. I ain't training the boy for a poet or seamstress," I says.

"Do you think you understand the lad? I don't myself," says she, kind of doubtful; but I thought I did, and there's where I bust my puckering string."

"What's the matter now, you lobster?" says I to him, talking like a section boss when he comes in to dinner that night with his face shiny from the towel. He looks at me a minute with his eyes wide, and I see his upper lips a-tremblin' like the whinny of a horse. "Tell him he's a lobster himself," says his mother, near heart-bust herself, but it was too late. The boy commenced to blubber like a kitten under water.

"What's the matter now?" I yells, banging on the table enough to jump the ice off the butter. "Speak up, man, and air your troubles!"

He stopped heaving sobs and straightened up, looking at me with his big blue eyes squinted up. "You're all against me," he yells. "Nobody cares what happens to me. I'll get even with you. You wouldn't care if I died!" And upon my word he walked out of the room like a prizefighter.

We had quite a few times like that, and sure as shooting the boy was learning to be a man. "You don't love me," he'd say, "so leave me alone. Mind your own business."

It was just before the spring storms that he went off one day and didn't come home till midnight. I talked pretty stiff to Annie about going to sleep and letting the boy take his own experiences, but a man's a boy's father, and I might as well tell you I heard the clock on the town hall every hour till I caught the sound of somebody sneaking into the barn. I pulled on a pair of shoes and some clothes and slid down and out through the back way. It was still pretty cold weather, with a lot of stars peppered in the black sky lighting up the places where the snow patches were left, and I could see the boy squeezing through the barn door.

"Mike," says I.

"Yes," says he.

"Where've you been?" I says.

"Won't tell," says he, picking up a broken ax handle. "I ain't going back on my friends, and you ain't going to wallop me, either."

I seen the shine of his eyes, and something says to me: "Look out, Jim, take it easy." So I says: "We're your friends and this is your home, ain't it?"

He gives a sniff and started for the house. It weren't till he got to the back door that he drops his ax handle and bursts out crying, sitting down on the step and shaking and putting his face in his sleeve. "There ain't anybody here cares nothing about me," he says, choking. "You're all against me."

That was the first time. Twice after that he was gone all night. Annie was near crazy and I ain't a-going to say it didn't rasp on me some. We didn't find out where he went because you couldn't have got it out of him with a derrick. "Never mind," says I, "it's making a man of him! He ain't soft any more. And my way's the way, all right."

The end came during the week of the equinox storm.

I guess it was about ten o'clock when the wind shewed a blind off the house and set others slamming and I sat up in bed breathing hard and feeling queer for the wild night outside. After a minute I got up and looked out the window.

And as I was looking I thought I seen a shadow blacker than the rest fighting its way toward the road. "Go on!" says I to myself, "the boy wouldn't light out on a night like this?" and then I wondered why I thought it was him. But when I went around to shut the blinds and looked into his room, the bed hadn't been opened, and the lad was gone.

Well, I made up my mind I wouldn't say nothing to the wife till morning,